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Debate Sharpens on Whether White House Is Being Forthright

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The revelation that the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon had been in secret communication with National Security Council officials in the White House over arms and hostage dealings without the knowledge of the State Department has sharpened debate about whether the administration, as President Reagan has pledged, is attempting to make public all the facts—or is covering them up.

Administration officials continue to say that "there will be no cover-up," as White House political director Mitchell Daniels pledged to Republican governors meeting yesterday in New Jersey. Secretary of State George P. Shultz spoke yesterday of the need to "get the dope out." But a senior Republican senator came close to charging that a cover-up has already been instituted.

David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, told reporters before convening the second week of closed-door testimony in the controversy that there had been "some effort on the part of some people to avoid" committee subpoenas over the weekend.

He added: "There have been other people who have been less than forthcoming deliberately." He declined to name them, but sharply criticized Cabinet members and top presidential aides for not looking into the scandal before now.

Yesterday's developments again suggested areas in which the administration could fill out the public record for the sake of speedy, full disclosure.

Shultz's testimony indicated that even the secretary of state has not been the beneficiary of full disclosure since the current scandal erupted on Nov. 25. He said he learned only this weekend that the U.S. ambassador in Beirut, John H. Kelly, had had "numerous conversations" with the National Security Council's Lt. Col. Oliver L. North "relating to the hostages"; that Kelly had been briefed about that subject by former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane; that

Kelly had employed CIA "privacy channels" to carry on secret communications with NSC representatives; and that he, Shultz, was "to put it mildly, shocked to learn this after the fact from an ambassador."

The administration could make public the extent of those "back-channel" communications and supply the names of the officials and agencies involved who received them, thus quickly resolving without further inquiry exactly who had prior knowledge of the secret transactions.

For instance, was knowledge of this secret communications link kept from CIA Director William J.

Casey? Shultz's revelation yesterday indicates that Casey now could find out about that direct channel, which apparently involved North's efforts to free hostages.

Similarly, the administration could clarify another area of the controversy—the secret Swiss bank accounts that figured in the flow of funds from the arms sales, their diversion to aid contra "freedom fighter" forces in Nicaragua and repayment to the United States for the cost of weapons shipped to Iran through Israel. Who controlled those accounts, who drafted and disbursed the funds, and who in the U.S. government oversaw them? What do the records of transactions involving those accounts show?

Another question about those arms: Reagan has stated that "everything that we sold them [Iran] could be put in one cargo plane and there would be plenty of room left over." Since he said that, administration officials have reported many arms shipments were made over many months. The Pentagon knows exactly how many arms were removed from U.S. armories for shipments to Iran or to replenish Israeli stocks when they were tapped for shipments to Iran, and it knows when those shipments were made. The Pentagon has refused to disclose anything about the arms that were shipped.

Estimates of the value of those arms have varied widely: from Attorney General Edwin Meese III's official price tag of \$12 million worth of arms to private ones suggesting that as much as a billion dollars' worth was involved. The administration could explain where

that official figure comes from, and could reconcile that part of the controversy by disclosing precisely the arms involved in those transactions and their full value.

Daily disclosures have centered on the role of North, and yet the administration has still not given much of an accounting of his activities in many of the secret operations involving Iran, the contras and other countries such as Brunei whose sultan is reported to have donated several million dollars to Nicaraguan rebels. That money also is said to have been funneled through a Swiss bank account in which North had a hand.

A critical factor in the controversy is North's relationship to Reagan, and exactly what North might have told the president about the various covert operations he ran from the White House.

The White House knows the dates, times and subjects of every meeting that North attended with the president, but so far it refuses to release those details. All it has been willing to say is that North and Reagan had about 19 such meetings since early 1985, and that four of them dealt with hostage families or the hostages.

There are numerous other unresolved questions that could be readily answered by the administration. For example, Shultz testified yesterday that his ambassador in Beirut, Kelly, was briefed last summer on the hostages in Lebanon by then-private citizen McFarlane. Why, on whose authority?

Shultz testified that his assistant secretary for Latin American affairs, Elliott Abrams, had raised money for humanitarian aid to the Nicaraguan contras from third countries, with his blessing. Shultz spoke as though there was no question that the money thus raised did indeed go for humanitarian, as opposed to lethal, assistance, but other department spokesmen have said Abrams had no idea where the money went. Did any of the money contributed for "humanitarian" purposes actually buy arms for the contras? The administration could provide all the facts on third-country contributions and where they ended up, if it knows.

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Administration failure to be forthcoming about questions like these seems certain to intensify concern that some of those facts are being deliberately withheld.

As Durenberger put it yesterday:

"Each of the Cabinet-level people who chose to ignore this the last 11 months now very appropriately are starting to ask questions of their own people and all I can say about that is it's about time, Shultz and everyone else. I don't think any of them who were aware did anything other than turn their backs on it, pretend it wasn't going on, and now they are all scrambling around to do their own investigations.

"They should have been doing that from January on in the interest of the president's role in foreign policy. Everybody who was in on the decision chose to pretend this was an NSC operation and they went about their own business and sort of ignored what was, I think, deliberately ignored, what was going on. I don't think that well served the policy or the presidency."